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## THE APOCALYPSE OF JOHN

### IV. ITS CHIEF IDEAS, PURPOSE, DATE, AUTHORSHIP, PRINCIPLES OF INTERPRETATION, AND PRESENT-DAY VALUE<sup>1</sup>

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The chief ideas of the New Testament Apocalypse, as of all apocalypses, are eschatological. They pertain to the consummation of the present age and the grand inauguration of the future age.<sup>2</sup> Being in despair of this world, which seemed to them irremediably evil, the apocalyptists fixed their attention and their hope upon another world to come. They dreamed of and longed for a re-creation, a new heaven and a new earth in which God would have his way—the present world having unaccountably gone to the bad. This type of thought was characteristically Hebrew-Jewish, as we can see in the Genesis story of the flood.<sup>3</sup> Men were conceived as having so sunk themselves in sin as to be irrecoverable and, therefore, a new start had to be made. The later Jewish eschatology in the main

<sup>1</sup> The former articles of this series, "Jewish Apocalyptical Literature," "The Thought, Style, and Method of Apocalyptic," and "The Content, Arrangement, and Sources of Material of the Apocalypse of John," appeared in the *Biblical World* for January, April, and July of this year.

<sup>2</sup> The New Testament, following the Jewish mode of thought in the first century A. D., conceives of two world-eras—"the present age" (Gal. 1:4; I Tim. 6:17; Heb. 9:26; Matt. 13:39 f.; 28:20; Mark 10:30) and "the future age" (Eph. 2:7; Heb. 6:5; Mark 10:30; cf. Rom. 8:19-22). The former comprises this earthly life of common experience, replete with moral and physical evil; the latter is to be the ideal age, a heavenly order of perfection. This was the form in which "the hope that springs eternal in the human breast" found expression in Jewish literature. The transition from the present age to the future age was expected to be catastrophically effected, the two eras being in themselves static. A developmental theory of the universe, giving rise to a conception of progress from one stage to the other, did not belong to ancient thought, and found not even a foreshadowing in Jewish ideas.

<sup>3</sup> Gen. 6:11-9:17. In 6:11 ff., we read: "And the earth was corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence. And God saw the earth, and, behold, it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted his way upon the earth. And God said unto Noah, The end of all flesh is come before me; for the earth is filled with violence through them; and, behold, I will destroy them with the earth."

looked for a renovated earth on which the redeemed should live, but extreme apocalyptic regarded the physical world as so contaminated by human sin that the earth itself, as well as the human race in general, must be destroyed. And this last is the idea set forth by the Apocalypse of John: "I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth are passed away. . . . And I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God."<sup>4</sup>

It was easy for the primitive Christians—even for gentile Christians—to take over this Jewish conception, because of the persecution directed against them, first by Jews, later by gentiles. Further, the moral conditions which the Christians saw in the Mediterranean world fell so far short of the gospel standard as to cause pessimistic thought of human possibilities. No hypothesis seemed to them reasonable except the deletion by God in his wrath against sin of the whole evil mass of men, and the world that they had filled with evil. The common Jewish view that the earth could be renovated for the abode of redeemed men did not become established in Christian thought, because it was too mild<sup>5</sup> and because Jesus did not teach it. The Christians felt themselves to be living in a world condemned by God for its sin and doomed by him to imminent destruction. The Christian summons was that all who would escape this destruction should bestir themselves and lay hold on salvation through Jesus Christ. This zeal to rescue as many persons as possible in the short time that remained<sup>6</sup> characterized the work of Paul and of the gospel missionaries generally.<sup>7</sup>

The Apocalypse of John has this same strenuous tone and limited point of view. God's intervention in behalf of his suffering children

<sup>4</sup> Rev. 21:1 f.

<sup>5</sup> Paul discloses his idea in Gal. 1:3 f.: "Our Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins, that he might deliver us out of this present evil world."

<sup>6</sup> Cf. I Thess. 5:1-10; I Cor. 7:29; Rom. 13:12; Phil. 4:5; Jas. 5:8; I Pet. 4:7; Rev. 1:3; 2:11; 22:10.

<sup>7</sup> Some would call this primitive Christian notion and impulse fanatical. Certainly the modern motive of missions is a different one. Leaving the future world with God to whom it belongs, our aim is to make men better and happier in the present world, holding as we do the optimistic view that God rules the present world, that his purposes are being realized in it, and that human well-being is attainable here.

is just at hand. The destruction of their enemies—his and theirs—is about to take place. The great act of divine judgment, which the Christians did not scruple to think of as divine vengeance,<sup>8</sup> was imminent, namely, the total destruction of the present world and the consignment of evil men to everlasting perdition.<sup>9</sup> The book gives expression to an intense hatred for the Roman government, because of its persecution and its insistence upon the worship of the emperor. One notes the absence of the gospel virtues of love, forbearance, forgiveness, returning good for evil. Instead there is the passionate denunciation, the call to God for retribution upon their adversaries. There can be no doubt that the trials which the Christians had to endure were severe, that their patience was taxed in the extreme, and that the situation of the church seemed to be critical. But this only explains—it does not justify—their Jewish<sup>10</sup> attitude of hatred and desire for revenge. It scarcely suffices to say that these passages, taken up from earlier Jewish apocalyptic, were unassimilated to Christian feeling; for the clamor of the Apocalypse for punishment upon Rome and the hosts of evil is one of the chief ideas of the book itself.

The conception of Christ which we find in the Apocalypse of John corresponds in general to the high Christological doctrine of the closing first century. It has somewhat in common with the conception of Christ that appears in the Gospel and First Epistle of John. Jesus Christ is the risen, exalted Messiah, now sharing the heavenly throne with God; and he it is who must complete the work already begun, accomplishing the final victory over all the adversaries of God and the saints.<sup>11</sup>

The ethical aspect of Christianity is almost submerged under the eschatological, in this book. It is worth while to observe the per-

<sup>8</sup> Rev. 6:10; 16:5 f.; 18:5 f.; cf. Luke 18:7 f.; 21:22; II Thess. 1:5-10; Rom. 12:19; Heb. 10:30 f.

<sup>9</sup> Rev. 14 9-11, 19 f.; 19:19-21; 20:7-10; 21:8; 22:15.

<sup>10</sup> Rev. 18:6. Krüger, *History of Early Christian Literature*, says (p. 35): "More than any other book in the New Testament, the Apocalypse of John shows a Jewish cast. The domain of Jewish apocalyptic thought was real to its author, and the evidences of a Christian spirit and a Christian temper, which are scattered like pearls throughout the whole Apocalypse, contrast strangely with the visions of an extravagant fancy, breathing hate and vengeance, which form the substratum of the book."

<sup>11</sup> Rev. 1:13-18; 3:21; 5:5, 9, 12; 7:14; 19:6-10; 22:1, 3.

spective of these two elements here, as compared with the perspective of them in the synoptic gospels, or even in the epistles of Paul. In the letters to the seven churches (chaps. 2, 3) there are some ethical passages: patience (2:3, 19) and repentance are enjoined (2:5, 16; 3:3, 19), also steadfastness in persecution (2:9 f., 13, 25; 3:8, 11), the avoidance of idol-meat and fornication (2:14, 20), love, faith, and ministry (2:19), watchfulness and faithfulness (3:2 f., 17-19). But all these injunctions are specifically directed to the preservation of those already Christians at the impending judgment, rather than to the general upbuilding of righteousness or to the conversion of further individuals. They have small similarity with the Sermon on the Mount or the twelfth chapter of Romans.

In fact, the one great idea of the Apocalypse of John is the vindication, victory, and glory of the saints that is just at hand. The destruction of sinners and the re-creation of the earth are necessarily involved. The saints, though not few in number,<sup>12</sup> are but a handful compared with the wicked, "the number of whom is as the sand of the sea" (20:8). The author does not seem to be troubled that the mass of mankind is doomed to destruction; his sympathy for them is not aroused; he regards them as abundantly meriting their fate of eternal torment (20:10). It is in accordance with God's will, and is enough, that the saints be saved. In many beautiful passages this triumph of the saints is sung. These passages, indeed, constitute the choicest portions of the book.<sup>13</sup> But while the author believes and affirms that the victory and glorification of the Christians are certain to come, God has not yet given them. So, along with the rapture of joy, there is a strain of anxiety and appeal. The soul cry of the Apocalyptist is: "How long, O Master, the holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?" (6:10).

The eschatological programme which the book proposes is one of the most definite and elaborate of all Jewish apocalyptic. It has of course specific Christian modifications, due to the idea that Jesus

<sup>12</sup> According to Rev. 5:11, they are "ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands;" in 7:9, "a great multitude, which no man could number, out of every nation, and of all tribes and peoples and tongues" (cf. 5:9; 19:6); in 14:1, 3, "a hundred and forty and four thousand" (cf. 7:4-8).

<sup>13</sup> Rev. 2:7, 10; 3:5, 12, 21; 7:16 f.; 11:15; 15:2-4; 19:6-9; chaps. 21, 22.

had already come as Messiah, but would come again to complete his messianic work. The programme runs thus:

1. The great convulsions in physical nature and calamities among men, presaging the end. Rev. 6:4, 8, 12-17; chap. 9; 11:13, 18.
2. The casting down of Satan from heaven and his onslaught upon the saints. 12:7-17.
3. The last persecution of the Christians by the Roman government, with the requirement of emperor-worship. Chap. 13.
4. Angelic proclamation of the impending judgment. Chap. 14.
5. The pouring out of God's extreme wrath upon the ungodly. Chaps. 15, 16.
6. The conquest and overthrow of Rome by the heavenly Christ, who marches forth to victory. Chaps. 18, 19.
7. Satan bound and cast into the abyss for a thousand years. 20:1-3.
8. First resurrection—that of the Christian martyrs, to live and reign with Christ a thousand years. 20:4-6.
9. Satan's release and final assault upon men. 20:7-10.
10. The ultimate destruction of Satan in the lake of fire and brimstone. 20:10.
11. Second (general) resurrection of all to judgment. 20:12, 13.
12. The final judgment, and the destruction of the wicked. 20:11-15.
13. The new heaven, the new earth, and the new Jerusalem. Chaps. 21, 22.

It was surely the expectation of the author, as it would also be of his readers, that these events were to take place quite as described. The strength of this kind of hope lay in the concreteness and literalness of its ideas. The primitive Christian eschatology, mistaken as it was concerning the time and manner of Christ's return, and concerning other fundamental aspects of the future, served nevertheless a very useful purpose. The mind could grasp and get help from so definite a hope, when a vague and undescribed future would have seemed uninspiring.

The purpose of the Apocalypse of John was just to furnish inspiration, steadfastness, and zeal to discouraged and wavering Christians. The persecution directed by Rome against them, which toward the

close of the first century spread widely and became increasingly severe, was distressing and disheartening. The faint-hearted were in danger of loss of faith, the uncertain were inclined to relapse. It required great faith, stout courage, and earnest devotion to remain steadfast in the Gospel through a period of such trial. Many had suffered martyrdom and more were about to perish in a similar way for their adherence to Christianity.<sup>14</sup> Multitudes had passed through "the great tribulation" to their heavenly home.<sup>15</sup> Those Christians who still remained upon the earth, upon whom the persecution still fell, needed the assurance and encouragement which this book could give. It was the duty of the leaders of the Christian cause to keep their followers true to the faith and life of the Gospel.

The Apocalypse of John rendered an essential and an extraordinary service in just this way.<sup>16</sup> The eschatological form of thought and the apocalyptic style were very effective, and the preservation of the book shows the continuous esteem in which it was held. The present distaste for this type of literature must not be allowed to obscure the high appreciation and influence of it in primitive Christian circles. Jesus, Paul, John, and the first Christians generally, thought in the eschatological form, used eschatological language, and made the eschatological appeal.

The book is addressed to and intended for readers who are already Christians. It has no direct evangelizing aim. While sinners might find in it warning against the impending destruction, and might be attracted by the glory depicted of the saints, thereby being led into the Christian faith, it is not with possible converts but with feeble and wavering Christians that the book is specifically concerned.

The persons addressed were Asian<sup>17</sup> Christians. This is shown by the letters to the seven churches in chaps. 2 and 3, for these

<sup>14</sup> Rev. 6:9-11; 20:4-6.

<sup>15</sup> Rev. 7:9-17, especially vs. 14.

<sup>16</sup> Beyschlag called the book "the epic of the Christian hope." Farrar called it "a rallying cry to Christian warriors." The former is the better phrase. The book does not summon the Christians to any resistance against the persecutors or the persecution. Nothing is proposed for them to do except to endure in faith and patience until God should effect their deliverance.

<sup>17</sup> By "Asian" in this connection one means the residents in the Roman province of Asia, the district which we now designate as western Asia Minor. Ephesus was its capital and center.

churches are specifically named by the cities with which they were connected—Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, Laodicea.<sup>18</sup> This internal evidence is supported by the early church tradition, which attests that the work was written at Ephesus by the apostle John. This is therefore the accepted hypothesis as to its place of composition and its destination. The western portion of Asia Minor was one of the chief areas of Roman persecution of the Christians around 100 A. D. A special effort was made to suppress the movement here. A remarkable monument of this campaign of persecution is preserved to us in the letter of Pliny, governor of Bithynia and Pontus, to the emperor Trajan and the latter's reply, written about 112 A. D.<sup>19</sup>

The date at which the Apocalypse of John was written may be confidently stated as 90–100 A. D.<sup>20</sup> This is at present one of the surest results of historical and literary criticism. We have had an interesting fluctuation of opinion on this point within the last generation. Thirty years ago the New Testament Apocalypse was assigned to the period 68–70 A. D., nearly all scholars concurring in this judgment.<sup>21</sup> Since then, as a result of more thorough investigation and consideration, the common opinion has returned to the traditional date, the closing years of Domitian's reign (81–96 A. D.).<sup>22</sup> The earlier date was assumed for the composition of the book on the ground of chap. 13, which was certainly given its present form at the end of Nero's reign (54–68 A. D.). The mystical number 666 (Rev. 13:18) is probably intended here to designate Nero.<sup>23</sup> If, then, all of the

<sup>18</sup> Rev. 1:11; 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14.

<sup>19</sup> For the Latin text and English translation see Gwatkin, *Selections from Early Christian Writers*, pp. 24–29.

<sup>20</sup> So Weizsäcker, H. J. Holtzmann, Harnack, Jülicher, Bousset, Zahn, Reinach, Godet, Milligan, Sanday, Ramsay, McGiffert, Bacon, Porter, and many other scholars.

<sup>21</sup> So Baur, Reuss, Hilgenfeld, Ewald, Lightfoot, Westcott, Salmon, Bovon, Beyschlag, *et al.*

<sup>22</sup> The tradition is handed down to us by Irenaeus (*Against Heresies*, V, 30, 3, written *ca.* 180 A. D.): "The vision of the Apocalypse was seen no very long time since, but almost in our own days, toward the end of Domitian's reign."

<sup>23</sup> Chap. 13 may have been first written by a Jew, of Palestine, against the emperor Caligula for his effort to enforce the worship of himself with divine honors. See especially Bousset, *Meyer Kommentar über die Offenbarung Johannis*, 1896 (1906<sup>2</sup>), *in loc.*: Barton, in *Amer. Journal of Theology*, Vol. II (1898), p. 797.



material contained in the book was written at one time, this definite date of one portion would fix the date of the entire composition.

The new element in the problem has been the discovery that the material brought together in the Apocalypse of John came originally from various times and situations, and these earlier indications of date continue in the several portions. Chap. 13 therefore still shows its previous reference to Nero's reign, but does not exclude the possibility that it found its way into this book at a later time. And when we turn to chap. 17 we find ourselves brought down to the reign of Domitian.<sup>24</sup> While much remains to be learned concerning the earlier history of the materials of which this book is composed, it seems likely further study will confirm the general conclusion that the sources lie before us in strata, not having been completely assimilated to the date of the book's composition.

A date as late as the last decade of the first century is also made necessary by the characteristics of the persecution which the Apocalypse describes. Extreme persecution of the Christians is in process. Many have been put to death for their faith, and still others are destined to suffer as martyrs.<sup>25</sup> Another period of violence is expected, and the Christians are enjoined to be prepared for this, that they may remain steadfast and win the crown of life.<sup>26</sup> The particular point of the persecution indicated in the book is the requirement of divine worship to be paid to the Roman Emperor by the Christians.<sup>27</sup> This was one of the tests of loyalty to the government enforced by Pliny in Bithynia and Pontus.<sup>28</sup> It marks the later

<sup>24</sup> The eighth king of 17:11 is probably Domitian. "Harnack regards this as one of the most definite dates in the New Testament literature because it is so evidently added to vs. 10, written under Vespasian (69-79 A. D.), to fit the vision to a later period. It effectually excludes the inference that would naturally be made from vs. 10 that the book as a whole comes from the earlier reign." So Porter, *Messages of the Apocalyptic Writers*, p. 188 f. This is in answer to Düsterdieck, B. Weiss, Bartlet, Scott, *et al.*, who argue for a date within the reign of Vespasian for the publication of the book.

<sup>25</sup> Rev. 6:9-11; 7:14; 20:4-6. The Martyr Antipas, of Pergamum, is individually mentioned, 2:13.

<sup>26</sup> Rev. 2:10 f.; 3:10; 16:6; 17:6; 18:24.

<sup>27</sup> Rev., chap. 13; 14:9-13; 15:2-4.

<sup>28</sup> In his letter to the emperor Trajan (see note 19 above), Pliny says: "As for those who said they neither were nor ever had been Christians, I thought it right to

stage of Roman persecution which set in about the beginning of the second century, when the policy of suppression became extended, deliberate and determined, in contrast to the spasmodic and local persecution in 64 A. D. under Nero.

The question as to who was the author of the Apocalypse is perplexing. He is named John in the book itself: "I John your brother and partaker with you in the tribulation" (1:9; cf. 1:1, 4); "I John am he that heard and saw these things" (22:8). He is not called an apostle, and seems to exclude himself from the apostles (18:20; 21:14),<sup>29</sup> saying of himself: "I am a fellow-servant with thee and with thy brethren the prophets" (22:9; cf. 1:1). There are three possibilities: (1) that the author John is John the Apostle, who however does not specifically state this; (2) that the name is used pseudepigraphically, the reader being intended to understand that the author is the apostle John, the actual author having concealed himself; (3) that some other John, not the apostle, and perhaps not determinable, was the author.

In favor of the first view, that John the Apostle wrote the book, is the early and strong church tradition to that effect, beginning with Justin Martyr (155 A. D.) and Irenaeus (180 A. D.). Also, the literary and theological kinship of the Apocalypse with the Gospel and Epistles of John, if they are the work of the apostle. Also, the temperament of this author as compared with the apostle John in the synoptic gospels, whom Jesus named a "son of thunder," who demanded of Jesus a place of prominence in his earthly messianic kingdom, and who wished to call down fire from heaven upon the inhospitable Samaritans.<sup>30</sup>

Against this view it is urged that the church tradition, though predominantly for the apostolic authorship, is by no means exclusively in this direction, as there is testimony that the apostle John died a martyr in Palestine, without ever having worked in Asia.<sup>31</sup> Also,

let them go, since they recited a prayer to the gods at my dictation, made supplication with incense and wine to your statue, which I had ordered to be brought into court for the purpose together with the images of the gods," etc.

<sup>29</sup> But Bacon, *Introduction to the New Testament*, pp. 237 f., thinks these verses are not prejudicial to the apostolic authorship, which he accepts.

<sup>30</sup> Mark 3:17; 10:35-45; Luke 9:51-55.

<sup>31</sup> See especially Bousset, *Meyer Kommentar, usw.*, pp. 33-51.

the tradition about the Ephesian residence of the apostle John is in confusion because of the reference to an elder or presbyter John.<sup>32</sup> As regards the common authorship with the gospel and epistles, it is urged that there is no means as yet of settling the question who wrote them; further, that there is so much difference between the Apocalypse and these other books as to make it impossible that they could have been by the same author.<sup>33</sup> As to the third point, it is urged that the characterization by temperament is too general to identify, as numerous persons of such temperament presumably existed in the first century.

Concerning the hypothesis that the Apocalypse is only pseud-epigraphically ascribed to the apostle John, it may be argued in its favor that the apocalyptic books were generally pseud-epigraphical. This is true of Jewish apocalyptic writings, and also of some Christian apocalyptic writings such as the Apocalypse of Peter, of which a fragment was recently found.<sup>34</sup> It would not be surprising if a Christian apocalypse had been written in the name of the apostle John, the cue having been taken from the synoptic characterization of him. The chief objection to this view is that a pseud-epigraphical

<sup>32</sup> Bousset, in *Encyclopedia Biblica*, art. "Apocalypse," §15, says: "The assumption that there were two Johns in Asia Minor—the apostle and the presbyter—finds only slender support in ancient tradition. Whatever the interpretation we may put on the important testimony of Papias preserved by Eusebius (*H. E.*, iii, 39, 1 ff.), it is at least certain that Papias speaks not of two Johns in Asia Minor—the apostle and the presbyter—but of one John, whom we are to look for as a near neighbor of Papias in space and time. Of a second John the second century and the first half of the third century know nothing; he is unknown to Irenaeus and to those who disputed the claims of the Fourth Gospel, to the Alogi and to Caius, to Tertullian, to Clement, and to Origen."

<sup>33</sup> Porter, *op. cit.*, p. 184, says: "Our author is certainly not the writer of the Fourth Gospel." Similarly Jülicher, *Introduction to the New Testament*, p. 280 (6th Ger. ed., p. 241): "It is one of the most assured results of New Testament criticism that not another line from the hand of the writer of the Apocalypse has been preserved to us in the New Testament, least of all in the Gospel of John; for if the Apocalypse is the most Jewish book of the New Testament, the Fourth Gospel is certainly the most anti-Jewish."

<sup>34</sup> See the Greek text in Preuschen, *Antilegomena*. This fragment "contains the end of a prophecy of Jesus about the last times, and a vision of the state of the blessed, followed by a much longer description of the torments of various classes of sinners." The writing probably belongs to the first half of the second century A. D.

writer would probably have made it abundantly clear that the apostle John was meant—a thing which our book does not accomplish. Besides, there is really no reason why the apostle John might not himself have composed such a work.

The third hypothesis, that some John of Asia, not the apostle, was the author of the New Testament Apocalypse, is preferred by an increasing number of scholars. Bousset has given a strong argument for this view. He holds that the apostle John never lived in Asia, but that there was an Asian John of prominence, who bore the title “elder” (=“presbyter”). This John was the author of the Apocalypse of John, later church tradition coming to identify him mistakenly with the apostle John. A similar argument is pressed by Harnack for a non-apostolic Asian authorship of the Gospel of John. With those who decline the apostolic authorship of the Johannine writings it is not customary to assign the Apocalypse and the Gospel to the same unknown author, because of the great differences between the two books.

A decision regarding the authorship seems therefore for the present impossible, and even a tentative judgment one may hesitate to form. The whole Johannine problem is complex and difficult, even after a hundred years of discussion. It is probably not too much to hope that in time there will come to be a consensus of scholarly opinion, but there is no subject on which scholarly opinion is now more diverse.

Meanwhile, the Apocalypse of John is the greatest apocalyptic book ever written, and is one of the chief monuments of first century Christianity.

How is this striking and peculiar book to be interpreted? A remarkable amount of exegetical effort and ingenuity have been expended upon the book. To discern the future is the impulse of many minds, and the absorbing pursuit of some. This book, like the Book of Daniel, but in still greater degree, has the predictive form and therefore seems in a special way attractive and useful to the forecaster. Probably on no book of Scripture has the interpretation of the centuries been so varied, fantastic, and fruitless. Yet each type of interpretation has had its day, has appealed to a large group, has satisfied a transient and artificial

theological interest.<sup>35</sup> We are the heirs of these interpreters, and there are current today several different methods that survive to compete for a little longer with the scientific method that has now reached maturity.

The "chiliastic" view, held and taught by the millenarians, treats the book as literal prediction pertaining to, and to be completely fulfilled at, the future advent of Christ. This is a recurrence to the original eschatological sense of the Apocalypse, accepting as correct the primitive Jewish-Christian hope and awaiting its precise fulfilment. These interpreters have learned nothing from the failure of these mistaken expectations to become realized in the first century, or any subsequent century. They still look forward to a speedy millenarian finish of the present world era.<sup>36</sup>

The "universal-history" method of interpretation treats the book as a specific collective prediction of the history of the church from the first to the last, until time shall be no more. Therefore some of the predictions of the Apocalypse have been already fulfilled, some are being fulfilled today, and still others are to be fulfilled in the future. It is a task of unflinching interest and occupation for these interpreters

<sup>35</sup> Irenaeus, Hippolytus, and Methodius made the earliest attempts at the interpretation of the Apocalypse. In the middle of the fourth century Ticonius produced a commentary on the book that consistently carried through a spiritualistic interpretation, resolving the eschatology into figure and symbol of spiritual truth. This method became the commonly accepted one until the time of the Renaissance and Reformation. Joachim of Floris published about 1200 A. D. an exposition of the book that revived its eschatological meaning, and led to the well-known chiliastic interpretation. Nicolaus de Lyra, in 1329 A. D., issued a treatment of the Apocalypse that presented an elaborate "universal-history" interpretation. Luther in 1534 A. D. turned the book to account in an anti-papal polemic. The English commentaries by Napier in 1593 A. D., Brightman in 1609 A. D., Mede in 1627 A. D., and Sir Isaac Newton in 1732, were all of them very far from a sane, historical method. Ludovicus ab Alcazar, in his *Vestigatio arcani sensus in Apocalypsi* (Antwerp, 1614 A. D.), laid the foundation of a scientific interpretation of the book, in his effort to get at a historical and psychological comprehension of the material contained in the Apocalypse.

We are all familiar with the eighteenth and nineteenth century types of interpretation, which are still in vogue, and may be read in the various contemporary expositions of the Book of Revelation. A full and valuable survey of the history of the interpretation of the book since the first century is given by Bousset, *Meyer Kommentar, usw.*, pp. 51-141; and very briefly in *Encyclopedia Biblica*, art. "Apocalypse," §§17-32.

<sup>36</sup> Leading representative expounders of this view are Maitland, Todd, *et al.*

to decide which predictions belong to each of these three classes. The results reached are of course fanciful.<sup>37</sup>

The "spiritualistic" theory of the book, which was the earliest theory explicitly worked out and which held the field for ten centuries, has been recently revived and is today the prevailing opinion in Germany, England, and America. It has been given currency by a number of able books from excellent scholars of the last generation, who wrote before the scientific interpretation of the book had become established.<sup>38</sup> According to this view, the Apocalypse of John presents a general conspectus of the progress and of the governing principles of the church in its entire course of development. The theory makes little of specific prediction in the book; as Dr. Milligan puts it, the Book of Revelation "gives no knowledge of the future that is not given first by our Lord, and then by others of his inspired apostles."

Over against these several theories of the meaning of the book, and setting them all permanently aside as ignoring the first-century relations and characteristics and significance, stands now the "scientific" interpretation of the Apocalypse of John. Technically it is more often called the "preterist" view, i. e., its predictions had a meaning only for their own time; to us they stand only as the vivid, detailed expectations of the imminent future which belonged to the Christian thought of the first century. Our interest in these forecasts is historical, as showing us what primitive Christianity was on its eschatological side; we do not now share these particular and (as they seem to us) peculiar hopes, we do not await or anticipate their fulfilment.

This scientific method of interpreting the Apocalypse has been built up step by step through the last seventy-five years by the ablest and most laborious biblical scholarship.<sup>39</sup> It has reached its final

<sup>37</sup> This method is set forth in the writings of Bengel, Hengstenberg, Elliott, *et al.*

<sup>38</sup> The several admirable works upon the Apocalypse by the late Dr. William Milligan are the best exponents of this spiritualistic interpretation. Other works from a similar standpoint are the treatises on the Apocalypse by Ebrard, Godet, Lee, Vaughan, *et al.*

<sup>39</sup> The most valuable contributions have been made by DeWette, Bleek, Ewald, Lücke, Düsterdieck, Reuss, B. Weiss, Weizsäcker, Farrar, and latest of all Bousset, who is today conceded to be the ablest interpreter of the book. His commentary on the Apocalypse (2d ed., 1906) in the Meyer series is the standard work in all countries.

stage in the last fifteen years, when the historical, psychological, and literary processes of investigation have been trained upon it and have triumphed over it. The main lines and methods for its interpretation have certainly become established. Of course much still remains to be done for a complete understanding of all the materials of the book, and for a complete account of the literary history of the contents of the book. But we need no longer be in doubt as to the purpose, general meaning, and characteristics of the Apocalypse of John. What these were, it has been the desire of these four papers to indicate.

The kind of interest that apocalyptic had for both Jews and Christians, and the kind of service which apocalyptic rendered in the New Testament times (175 B. C.—135 A. D.), are things of the past. It is by the use of other thought forms and literary forms that moral and religious effects are now accomplished. The twentieth century does not much care to speculate concerning the end of the world, partly because the end of the world looks to be quite remote, but still more because we have no confidence that we could think out successfully what that end would be. The imaginings of the ancient Jewish mind, adopted by the primitive Christians, as to the time and manner of the consummation of things mundane do not appeal to present-day thinkers. Our cosmology, instead of being static, is developmental.<sup>40</sup>

Nevertheless, the Apocalypse of John will continue for long to have a kind of practical value, as one form in which the Christian belief in the ultimate triumph of truth and righteousness may find expression and exert influence. That evil, disorder, and misery are

<sup>40</sup> Clarke, *The Use of the Scriptures in Theology*, has some trenchant paragraphs on the survival of the primitive Christian eschatology in twentieth-century faith. I quote from one of them, not for acceptance but to provoke thought: "This discredited hope of a soon-returning Christ and a visible kingdom has long been kept alive in perpetual disappointment by the accepted doctrine of the Scriptures. But the sound historical interpretation which is now possible assigns to it no place at all in the gift and revelation of Christ, and therefore our principle requires us to drop it and all that belongs to it out of our Christian theology. Visible advent, simultaneous resurrection, assemblage of all men for judgment, millennial reign of Christ on earth—all is Jewish survival, historically discredited by the work of Christ himself; it is a remainder from pre-Christian life and hope, demonstrated to be non-Christian by the different course of Christian history; wherefore it forms no part of Christian theology" (pp. 107 f).

destined to extinction, and that the good are destined to blessedness and glory, is still a cardinal doctrine of all those who interpret the universe in terms of personality. The Apocalypse is an optimistic book in respect to the welfare of the few.<sup>41</sup> We join in this much optimism. But modern thought is still more optimistic, for *we* look for the ultimate welfare of humanity in the whole and in a real sense of the world itself, in accordance with the promise that is resident in the universe as we already know it.

<sup>41</sup> Destruction awaits the many, and this earth itself, according to the New Testament Apocalypse. The question increasingly presses upon us whether a salvation that is achieved only by the few is a kind of salvation that will be acceptable even to them. The sense of human brotherhood, and of the organic unity of human life, makes it difficult to find happiness for one's self when others are without it.